

Talk for Divine Mercy Celebration: April 23, 2017

Five-year-old Timmy was starting kindergarten. Timmy's Mum loved him very much and, being a worrier; she was concerned about him walking to school when he started kindergarten. She walked him to school the first couple of days, but when he came home one day, he told his mother that he did not want her walking him to school every day. He wanted to be like the "big boys." He protested loudly, so she had an idea of how to handle it.

She asked a neighbour, Mrs Goodnest, if she would surreptitiously follow her son to school, at a distance behind him that he would not likely notice, but close enough to keep a watch on him. Mrs Goodnest said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, Mrs Goodnest and her little girl, Marcy, set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbour boy he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the kids walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, the little friend of Timmy noticed that this same lady was following them as she seemed to do every day all week. Finally, he said to Timmy, "Have you noticed that lady following us all week? Do you know her?" Timmy nonchalantly replied, "Yea, I know who she is." The little friend said, "Well who is she?" "That's just Shirley Goodnest," Timmy said. "Shirley Goodnest? Who the heck is she and why is she following us?" "Well," Timmy explained, "every night my Mum makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers cuz she worries about me so much. And in it, the psalm says, "'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life.' So I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

This afternoon we gather to celebrate this profound truth that King David expressed all those centuries ago, and Timmy paraphrased in his version of the psalm:

"Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever

What is mercy? We better understand the English word by looking at the word in Latin. Misericordia is the Latin for "mercy", derived from misericors, "merciful", which is in turn derived from misereri, "to pity", and cor, "heart". To have mercy is to have compassion for another person from the heart.

Thomas Aquinas referred to this kind of mercy as affective mercy. It affects the heart of the one who is expressing mercy.

We could say of affective mercy that human misery calls forth Divine Mercy. Let me illustrate affective mercy this way. A parent knows how this is. When a child is suffering from a severe cold with a sore throat, runny nose, severe congestion, and assorted aches and pains, and all he can do is throw his arms around your neck and cry—what does this evoke in you as a parent? It awakens your pity, and you reach out and try to relieve the child's distress in any way you possibly can. Why? Because his misery has called forth your mercy.

Parental compassion is a common expression of affective mercy that comforts the child while calling forth from the mum or dad an expression of sacrificial love. There is associated with mercy a kind of vulnerability that can appear as a helplessness. Mercy cannot make the suffering go away but is a way to be present to the one suffering in a real and caring way. Indeed, Jesus' mercy was perceived as a weakness when people ridiculed: "He saved others, let him save himself".

Mercy often has this sacrificial and seemingly helpless dimension to it, as the wounds of Jesus visibly express

We see this especially in a beautiful phrase from Luke 1:78. There we read of the "tender mercy of God". The word "tender" means to be moved from one's bowels and identifies mercy as having this visceral and gut-wrenching quality to it. Repeatedly in the Gospel, we read that Jesus was "moved with pity". The Misrecrodia of Jesus is this compassion that stirs him from the heart.

I have mentioned this before, but it is worth repeating because it is something we are always invited to ponder: God most fully shows his power by extending mercy. What we most need to know about God and experience from him is his mercy.

How often have people been left with an understanding of God that portrays him as vindictive, angry and just wanting to let us have it? We often view power from a human perspective in this way. Far too often there have been priests who have presented God as someone of whom we should be terrified.

A woman once told me the story of how when as an eight-year-old she threw up going forward for her first Holy Communion because she was so terrified of the priest who in turn represented a terrifying God. What an idol this is. Fashioning God to be like a disordered and violent father or mother. So distorting God where His anger is portrayed as uncontrollable and nothing delights him more than to punish and send us to hell.

This kind of characature is not the tender mercy of the Father whom Jesus presents in the Parable of the Two Sons. Here is the Father constantly waiting and longing for the younger son's return and for the older son to celebrate and to share in the tender mercy of the Father.

So too with us. We are constantly in need of returning to the Father of tender mercy so, in turn, we can become a people who embody this mercy in our own lives.

St John Paul II, the Pope of Divine Mercy, expressed so beautifully why this mercy is so needed. He was at the grave of St. Faustina, the Polish Apostle of Divine Mercy, to who whom the Lord revealed his merciful heart. While there in 1997 John Paull II stated:

There is nothing that man needs more than Divine Mercy—that love which is benevolent, which is compassionate, which raises man above his weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God.

What inspires us to grow in holiness? It is not the preaching of hell fire and brimstone. Rather it is the declaration of God's benevolence and compassion that raises us above our weakness.

This leads to Thomas Aquinas second way of talking about mercy. Not only is mercy affective, it is also effective in bringing about change in the one who is the object of mercy. This is what St John Paul II means when he writes:

that love which is benevolent, which is compassionate, (affective mercy) which raises man above his weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God. (effective mercy).

See how this plays out in the life of St. Peter. On that night of denial Jesus caught Peter's eye, and at the rooster's announcement of the early dawn Peter breaks down and weeps, and weeps and weeps. Here is our misery displayed with such candour. But then there is that other encounter where on the Galilean beach after a fish fry Jesus looks at Peter with piercing, benevolent and compassionate love. On that early morning, Jesus raises Peter above his weakness to the infinite heights of the holiness of God. For on that beach, Jesus tells Peter, now the keys are yours. You have finished your driver's ed. and I am leaving the guiding and driving of the Church to you. I know now Peter that you love me because you know my love for you. So, tend and feed my lambs and sheep with the very mercy that has been your diet. Peter discovered:

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This is how mercy is to work in our own lives. Knowing God's Affective mercy imparts to us the grace so that we can appropriate effective mercy and so grow in holiness.

Mercy is at the heart of the Gospel. Our misery calls forth God's mercy. God wants us to know that his goodness and mercy do follow us all the days of our life.

There is a passage from Sirach that captures this beautifully:

- What are human beings, and of what use are they?
What is good in them, and what is evil?***
- 9 The number of days in their life is great if they reach one hundred years.***
- 10 Like a drop of water from the sea and a grain of sand,
so are a few years among the days of eternity.***
- 11 That is why the Lord is patient with them
and pours out his mercy upon them.***
- 12 He sees and recognises that their end is miserable;
therefore he grants them forgiveness all the more.***
- 13 The compassion of human beings is for their neighbours,
but the compassion of the Lord is for every living thing.¹***

¹ The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition. (1993). (Sir 18:8–13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Our misery calls forth God's mercy. From our perspective to live 100 years would be a remarkable milestone and indeed it is. But when compared to eternity 100 years is like a drop of water in the sea or a grain of sand on the shore. But listen, it is to us creatures of such finitude that God's mercy is extended not only to us, but every living thing. Mercy is the heart beat of God.

To St. Faustina, Jesus affirmed what Sirach poetically announces when he said:

Everything that exists has come forth from the very depths of My most tender mercy. Every soul in its relation to Me will contemplate My love and mercy throughout eternity. The Feast of Mercy emerged from My very depths of tenderness. It is My desire that it be solemnly celebrated on the first Sunday after Easter. Mankind will not have peace until it turns to the Fount of My Mercy.²

While these words were spoken to St Faustina in the 1930s it was not until 2001 that St. John Paul II made this Sunday Divine Mercy Sunday. It was St. John Paul who wrote about the merciful depiction of Jesus in the image that is to the right of the altar.

Anyone can look at this image of the merciful Jesus, His Heart radiating grace, and hear in the depths of his own soul what Blessed Faustina heard: "Fear nothing. I am with you always". And if this person responds with a sincere heart: "Jesus, I trust in you," he will find comfort in all his anxieties and fears...

Here again are the affective and effective dimensions of mercy. As we are touched by the Lord's affective mercy it establishes in us the effective fruit of Jesus' mercy which is deepening trust.

It is beautiful to remember the way providence was joined to mercy in the life of St. John Paul II, the Pope of Mercy.

It is a work of Providence that four years after he had established this as Divine Mercy Sunday, just after 9 pm Rome Time, April 2 2005, which was the Eve of the Feast of Divine Mercy that St. John Paul II left this world. The one who had invited the world to trust in the Divine Mercy of Jesus, witnessed to Jesus words: "Fear nothing. I am with you always", as he took his last breath.

Six days later on April 8th Cardinal Ratzinger at the Requiem Mass concluded his homily with these words:

None of us can ever forget how in that last Easter Sunday of his life, the Holy Father, marked by suffering, came once more to the window of the Apostolic Palace and one last time gave his blessing urbi et orbi. We can be sure that our beloved Pope is standing today at the window of the Father's house, that he sees us and blesses us. Yes, bless us, Holy Father. We entrust your dear soul to the Mother of God, your Mother, who guided you each day and who will guide you now to the eternal glory of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

² (Diary of St. Faustina Kowalska, # 699)

John Paul II is the Pope of Divine Mercy whose life was a beautiful expression of David's words:

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

May the Polish nun whose vision brought into focus for us Divine Mercy and the Polish Pope who gave to the Universal Church Divine Mercy Sunday be the focus of our gratitude as we pray:

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

St Faustina pray for us. St John Paul II pray for us so that we may increasingly say “Jesus I trust in you”



Divine Mercy Quotes

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